

Message Text

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AMCONSUL MADRAS

C O N F I D E N T I A L NEW DELHI 0061

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, IN

SUBJECT: SUBSTANCE OF PARLIAMENTARY REFORMS

SUMMARY: AFTER PARLIAMENT CONVENES ON JANUARY 5, THE GOI WILL INTRODUCE NEW MEASURES BASICALLY DESIGNED TO CURB OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE OPPOSITION TO ASSERT ITSELF IN PARLIAMENT. THE MEASURES WILL PROBABLY CALL FOR A REDUCTION IN THE NUMBER OF DAYS PARLIAMENT SITS FROM 120 TO 50 DAYS PER YEAR; THE STRENGTHENING OF THE SPEAKER'S DISCIPLINARY POWERS; THE TIGHTENING OF PROCEDURAL RULES; AND A LIMITATION ON DEBATE AND THE RIGHT OF INDIVIDUAL MEMBERS TO INFLUENCE LEGISLATIVE PROCEEDINGS. END SUMMARY.

1. A COMMITTEE OF THE RULING CONGRESS PARTY HAS MADE A NUMBER OF RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHANGES IN THE FUNCTIONING AND RULES OF PROCEDURES OF PARLIAMENT. THE MAIN POINTS OF THE RECOMMENDATIONS ARE:

(A) THE NUMBER OF PLENARY SITTINGS OF PARLIAMENT WILL BE DRASTICALLY REDUCED FROM 120 DAYS IN A YEAR (AT PRESENT SPREAD OVER THREE SESSIONS: FEBRUARY-MAY BUDGET SESSION; CONFIDENTIAL

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JULY-SEPTEMBER MONSOON SESSION; AND NOVEMBER-DECEMBER

WINTER SESSION) TO 88 DAYS OF TWO SESSIONS, INCLUDING SATURDAYS AND SUNDAY HOLIDAYS. THIS WOULD MEAN THAT THE TWO HOUSES WILL HAVE ABOUT 50 SITTINGS EACH YEAR.

(B) THE TWO HOUSES ARE ONLY FORMALLY TO DEBATE THE PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS, RAILWAY AND GENERAL BUDGETS AND THE PRINCIPLES OF THE FINANCE AND OTHER BILLS. THE PASSING OF BILLS AND VOTES ON DEMANDS FOR GRANTS WILL CONTINUE TO BE DONE AT THE FULL SITTINGS OF THE TWO HOUSES. CONSTITUTION AMENDMENT BILLS AT ALL THEIR STAGES WILL CONTINUE TO BE DISCUSSED AND PASSED AT FULL SITTINGS OF THE TWO HOUSES INSTEAD OF IN THE COMMITTEES.

(C) MUCH OF THE DETAILED WORK BEING DONE AT PRESENT AT THE FULL SITTINGS OF THE TWO HOUSES IS TO BE DISTRIBUTED AMONG A NUMBER OF STANDING COMMITTEES, EACH TO BE CONCERNED WITH CERTAIN AREAS OF NATIONAL AFFAIRS, SUCH AS INTERNAL AFFAIRS, ECONOMIC AFFAIRS, AND FOREIGN AFFAIRS. THE SECOND READING OF BILLS AS WELL AS DETAILED CONSIDERATION OF THE DEMANDS FOR GRANTS ARE TO BE DONE IN THE COMMITTEES, COMPRISING MEMBERS FROM BOTH HOUSES.

(D) CERTAIN RULES OF PROCEDURE WILL BE TIGHTENED, AMENDED OR DROPPED ALTOGETHER. FOR INSTANCE, PROCEDURES FOR HALF AN HOUR DISCUSSION AND ADJOURNMENT MOTIONS ARE TO BE ELIMINATED. CALLING ATTENTION NOTICES ARE TO BE STRICTLY CONNECTED WITH MATTERS OF URGENT IMPORTANCE AND SHOULD NOT BE DISCUSSED FOR MORE THAN 30 MINUTES. NOT MORE THAN THREE MEMBERS ARE TO BE PERMITTED TO PUT QUESTIONS FOR ELICITING INFORMATION. AMENDMENTS TO BILLS WILL BE MADE IN COMMITTEES AND NOT ON THE FLOORWQ

(E) THE SPEAKER'S DISCIPLINARY POWERS WILL BE FURTHER STRENGTHENED.

2. PRESS REPORTS SAY THAT THE UNION LAW MINISTRY IS STUDYING THE PROPOSALS AS WELL AS THE REQUIRED LEGISLATION POSSIBLY INCLUDING CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENTS TO PUT THE INTO EFFECT.

3. COMMENT: MOST IF NOT ALL OF THE PROPOSED CHANGES
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WILL BE ACCEPTED AND IMPLEMENTED BY PARLIAMENT DURING THE COMING SESSION, BEGINNING JANUARY 5. SOME OF THE CHANGES WILL SOMEWHAT IMPROVE THE FUNCTIONING OF PARLIAMENT AND REDUCE MOST OF THE PROCEDURAL WRANGLINGS, WALK-OUTS AND OCCASIONAL PROLONGED OUTBURSTS THAT THE OPPOSITION MINORITY HAS USED TO REGISTER ITS DISSENT AGAINST THE LARGE CONGRESS MAJORITY. IN EFFECT, THE REFORMS WHEN IMPLEMENTED WILL CONSIDERABLY TRIM DOWN THE OPPORTUNITIES AVAILABLE TO THE OPPOSITION TO HOLD

THE FLOOR OF THE HOUSE AND TO AIR ITS GRIVEANCES. LIKE THE NEW
RESTRICTIONS ON PARLIAMENTARY PRESS REPORTING, THEY AMOUNT TO
ONE MORE SET OF MEASURES THE EXECUTIVE IS TURNING TO IN ORDER TO
"TAME" PARLIAMENT.
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